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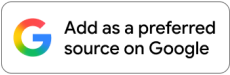
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Solidarity AI and the choices facin

Time for a public-interest approach to digital infrastructure, says the Plat

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Artificial intelligence does not exist only as software. It rests on data centres, electricity, chips, cables, lai

How many agencies govern AI in Thailand?

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A lithium-ion battery fire at South Korea's National Inform Service data centre in Daejeon on Sept 26, 2025, exposed modern life depends on physical infrastructure. The blaze

nearly a full day, destroyed almost 100 government digital and administrative record systems and disrupted hundreds of

Recent attacks on energy infrastructure in the Middle East reinforced the same lesson. Artificial intelligence does not run on software. It rests on data centres, electricity, chips, cables and institutions. Put simply, AI is a human-built system that understands, recognise patterns, generate content, classify information, make predictions and support decisions.

Yet public discussion often treats AI as something almost detached from cables, warehouses, workers and power grids. Arguments around it, whether celebratory or critical, are made by a relatively small circle of executives, journalists, policymakers and scholars clustered in the United States and Europe, who largely ignore which questions get asked and which realities remain peripheral.

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They tend to frame AI as a story of innovation, investment and competition, or else as a debate about safety, bias and regulatory concerns surely matter. But they do not fully capture how AI is used in Southeast Asia, where questions of labour, language and dependency are more immediate.

DISTURBING REALITY

Behind the headlines lies a different reality, shaped by intense concentrated power and inequality. Across outsourcing hubs in Manila, Nairobi and Hyderabad, thousands of workers review content to train and maintain AI systems. Reports have documented depression, trauma, low pay and limited support.

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A 2025 investigation by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and the Guardian documented depression, insomnia, self-harm and suicide attempt among low-paid moderators reviewing disturbing content on Meta platforms in Ghana. The case points to a broader pattern where layers of subcontracting shift risk downward, even as decision-making and financial gains remain concentrated at the top.

Much of today's AI ecosystem operates through what can be described as an "extraction stack": a vertically integrated system spanning resources, data centres, algorithms, labour and applications.

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number of American tech companies control this stack, do the technologies are built, governed and deployed.

Efforts to regulate these systems through ethical guidelines and frameworks matter, but they often leave the deeper issue of ownership.

Who owns the infrastructure, governs the data and benefits from the value created? What long-term dependencies arise when we rely on a handful of external providers for computing power, cloud storage and core models? And when governments invest heavily in digital infrastructure, what other priorities may be deferred, including public education?

Without addressing those questions, the underlying system of scale, efficiency and market concentration, narrowing the choices available to governments later on.

A solidarity ecosystem for AI is beginning to emerge, in various forms: institutions, cooperatives and civic solidarity economy or shared infrastructure and more democratic forms of governance. AI as a set of institutional choices reflects societal values and public priorities.

A practical example is the Commons-based Machine Learning framework in the UK, where local authorities are co-developing a framework with governance principles that emphasize participation, accountability and democratic oversight.

Across Asia, countries are answering these questions in different ways. Vietnam is building national data infrastructure as part of its strategy for digital sovereignty. Singapore, meanwhile, offers a model: its SEA-LION open-source system for Southeast Asia shows how public and research resources can serve the region as a single national market.

These efforts deserve attention, but they also raise a hard question: Is national control enough on its own? Or does resilience require regional infrastructure, public-interest standards and cross-border cooperation that reduces dependence without recreating it?

AI begins far from the scene of democratic governance. Data are extracted under difficult conditions, and the infrastructure remains concentrated in the hands of a few actors. As a result, failure, commercial disputes and other risks can disrupt across entire regions.



Alternative models are emerging, and for Thailand and its neighbors, cooperative and public-interest approaches to digital infrastructure suggest a more resilient alternative to dependence on a handful of external providers. The region already has long traditions of cooperative organizations, and extending those principles into digital infrastructure could enhance resilience and control.

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The question is not only who uses AI, but who shapes the under which it operates, including data, labour and public life. In Thailand, this is especially sensitive because digital systems are not only technical; they also influence what becomes visible, and what is punishable in public life.

As Janjira Sombatpoonsiri and her co-authors write: "Online campaigns legitimise severe penalties against activists, making the endorsement of these legal actions." More broadly, digital technology does not simply carry information. It also helps structure

SOCIAL PURPOSE

That is one reason the next stage of the AI discussion in Asia is not only on adoption. It also has to address ownership, accountability and social purpose. Can AI serve farmers, workers, patients and local communities, rather than making them more dependent on global platforms? Can it strengthen linguistic diversity, public trust and democratic oversight rather than weaken them?

These questions will be taken up at the Solidarity AI conference at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok from Nov 12 to 15, 2023. The gathering will bring together researchers, AI developers, labour union organisers, cooperative leaders and digital rights activists from across Asia and beyond to consider how technology might be used by and for the communities it affects.

In that sense, the challenge for Thailand is not whether to embrace AI, but how to help shape a version of it that is grounded in local infrastructures on which modern life depends, accountable to local governance and resilient enough to serve the public when things go wrong, as they did in Daejeon.

Trebor Scholz, scholar-activist and founding director of the Platform Cooperativism Consortium

For more information and registration details for the conference, see the Platform Cooperativism Consortium website, <https://platform.coop/events/solidarity-ai/>

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